

A Clinician's Primer on Imagery

By Martin Rossman, MD

Why is imagery important?

As a physician working primarily with people with chronic and life-threatening illnesses for nearly 30 years, I have found working with mental imagery, especially in an interactive manner, one of the most useful approaches I have ever encountered.

As doctors, we are trained to diagnose and treat physically observable manifestations of disease and illness. In some instances, we can provide definitive, even life-saving interventions and both we and our patients are pleased and grateful. In many circumstances, however, our attempts to help do not result in a neat and acceptable result. We may not be able to diagnose the source of our patients condition (84% of the fifteen most common symptoms presenting to a primary care doctor never come to be diagnosed as a disease state), or, alternatively, we can give the condition a name, and perhaps provide some relief, but can do little or nothing about much of the suffering that accompanies it. This is especially true with our patients with chronic illness, who often represent the most challenging and time-consuming aspects of our practices.

People with chronic illness need not only excellent medical care, but attention to what we might call the invisible, yet important aspects of health care that are only accessible through their own awareness . A skilled clinician with sophisticated imagery skills can help the patient effectively work with their own strengths to help themselves do better whatever their medical condition.

What is Imagery?

Imagery is a natural way the human nervous system stores, accesses and processes information. It is the coding system in which memories, fantasies, dreams, daydreams and expectations are stored. It is a way of thinking with sensory attributes, and in the absence of competing sensory cues, the body tends to respond to imagery as it would to a genuine external

experience. The most common and familiar example of this phenomenon is sexual fantasy and its attendant physiologic responses.

Imagery has been shown in dozens of research studies to be able to effect almost all major physiologic control systems of the body, including respiration, heart rate, blood pressure, metabolic rates in cells, gastrointestinal mobility and secretion, sexual function, and even immune responsiveness. Imagery has been shown to be especially helpful in working with chronic pain.

Imagery is a rapid way to access emotional and symbolic information that may affect physiology and the way the patient cares for themselves. For instance, a patient may talk at length about the nature of their back pain yet we may not appreciate it as much as when they use imagery-laden language and say "It feels like a knife twisting in my back." Not only does this give us a graphic, sensory description of the symptom, it may also lead to important psychosocial information involved in the perception of the pain, in this case, perhaps leading to respectful questioning about betrayals or related feelings.

Forms of Imagery Interventions

"*Guided imagery*" is a term variously used to describe a range of techniques from simple visualization and direct imagery-based suggestion, through metaphor and story-telling. Guided imagery is used to help teach psychophysiologic relaxation, to relieve symptoms, to stimulate healing responses in the body, and to help people tolerate procedures and treatments more easily.

"*Interactive Guided Imagerysm*" (IGI) is a service-marked term coined by the Academy for Guided Imagery for a process where imagery is used in a highly interactive format to evoke patient autonomy. This gives patients ways to draw on their own inner resources to support healing; to make appropriate adaptations to changes in health; and to better understand what their symptoms may be signalling.

Here's a clinical example : A 28 year old woman with chronic mixed headaches came in with a severe migraine. We had worked together before,

so I guided her through a simple progressive relaxation technique, asked her to focus directly on her pain and invite an image to come to mind that could tell her something useful about the pain. An image came of a large mynah bird, sitting on her head and pecking away in the area of her pain. "Why's he doing that?", she asked, and I suggested that she ask him, and imagine he could answer in a way she could understand. To her surprise, the bird answered, "Why not? You let everyone else pick on you!" She started crying and told me that the day before she had accidentally overheard a fellow employee making fun of her in the coffee room. She started to get angry, but then got nauseous, sick and started to feel a migraine aura. She went home for the day and the migraine developed into the headache that brought her in. In her imagery dialogue, the bird agreed to work with her to better understand and prevent her headaches. She left feeling 90% relieved without any other intervention.

Continuing dialogues with the mynah revealed a long-standing pattern of low self-esteem and non-assertiveness. The bird told her that this resulted in her holding anger which created headaches. I referred her to a good therapist and after 18 months she was not only relieved of headaches but much happier and heading in a more successful direction in her life. Attending to her pain in this way led her to healing that included but went beyond her headaches.

What Are it's Applications in Medicine?

Since imagery is a way of thinking, it has widespread applications in clinical medicine, ranging from simple relaxation techniques, through preparation for procedures and surgery, treatment adherence, reducing convalescent time, changing lifestyle behaviors, and finding meaning in illness.

Since imagery is a natural language of the unconscious and the human nervous system, it's potential uses in the healing professions are protean. Interactive Guided Imagerysm is essentially a way of working with the patient, rather than a way of treating particular disease entities but is especially effective in the areas listed below:

- Relaxation training, and stress reduction
- Pain relief
- Managing chronic illness and preventing acute exacerbations
- Preparation for surgery and medical procedures
- Medication compliance and adherence issues
- Cancer treatment and Life-threatening illnesses
- Terminal illnesses and end of life care
- Fertility, birthing and delivery
- Grief therapy
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Anxiety disorders
- Depression

Interactive Guided Imagery includes techniques that are applicable in the course of brief medical office visits, or in longer counseling or psychotherapy formats. Physicians may practice it themselves or employ an ancillary health professional to offer the longer sessions.

Guided Imagery is also a very effective self-help modality that can augment virtually any type of professional care.

Is there any risk in referring a patient for Interactive Guided Imagery?

The primary danger in using IGI to augment healing in medical situations is when it is used in lieu of appropriate medical diagnosis and/or treatment. We emphasize the necessity of an accurate diagnosis so that the patient can also be made aware of the medical options for treatment. When you refer a patient for IGI after evaluating their medical condition, this risk is eliminated.

Patients who are psychotic or who are on the verge of psychotic breaks, patients with dissociative disorders and patients with borderline personality disorders must be handled with care. While these diagnoses do not represent absolute contraindications for imagery work, they require health professionals using imagery to have expertise in these areas.

Qualifications to practice imagery

While many health professionals utilize guided imagery in their work, many have only learned to lead someone through non-interactive scripts. The quality of their training and competence with this intervention is quite variable, and most have never been observed or examined to assess the quality of their work. Since there is potential for doing harm when these techniques are used inappropriately, or without adequate skills, standards of practice and quality control is an important issue.

The Academy for Guided Imagery has established standards of competence and ethical behavior for licensed health professionals practicing Interactive Guided imagery. Quality assurance is based on written examinations and direct observation of clinical work in small group and individual supervision sessions. The Academy's program is approved for Continuing Education credit by the American Psychological Association, the National Association of Social Workers and the California Board of Registered Nursing.

What's the knowledge base this is built on?

There is an extensive theoretical, basic science and clinical literature on the functions of imagery in common clinical situations faced by the medical doctor. A listing of the key reference works follows, and a more extensive bibliography can be accessed by contacting the Academy for Guided Imagery.

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How can I learn more about imagery or find a qualified practitioner?

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